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Political geographers and geographical political scientists – crisis, what crisis?¹

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In 2017 Cambridge University Press published two excellent books by American social scientists that are highly relevant to my research and other academic interests. Both are by political scientists. Both have the word geography in their subtitle – *Red fighting blue. How geography and electoral rules polarize electoral politics* (Hopkins, 2017); *The space between us. Social geography and politics* (Enos, 2017). Both almost entirely ignore the discipline of geography and its published literature: Hopkins does not refer to a single article or book by a recognised academic geographer; Enos refers to just one piece – Stan Openshaw's (1983) primer for undergraduates on the modifiable areal unit problem.

My assessment of the implications of these two stimulating books for academic geography and its relations with other social science disciplines was considerably enhanced by the publication of John O'Loughlin's (2018) wide-ranging and hard-hitting retrospective essay on his thirty-five years of editorial involvement with *Political Geography*. Some of his challenging arguments are of marginal relevance to my main concern, but several raise important issues for disciplinary and inter-disciplinary futures that I develop briefly here regarding the common ground, or lack of it, between political science and political geography – arguments that I believe have a wider relevance to much of contemporary (human) geography and its relationships with other social sciences.²

O'Loughlin suggests that *Political Geography* has only partly met its foundation goal of fostering cross-disciplinary links; many non-geographers who submitted papers had them rejected because of their 'lack of engagement or understanding of the core tenets of geography' (O'Loughlin, 2018: 144). In seeking to be 'geographical' not only do they privilege space over place but also they have a 'narrow and outmoded conception of space' (p.147) – a conception that he terms a 'Cartesian coordinate approach', or 'political geometry'. Many of those papers were strong analytically; a large proportion used quantitative methods as the core of their empirical contributions (which very few papers submitted by geographers do – 'political geography is becoming more like anthropology in its devotion to detailed ethnographies as political science is becoming more like economics with its emphasis on formal theory and statistical modeling': p.148), but they are not, as he understands it, geographical. In part this may be because they follow Gary King (1996) who argued to political geographers that properly-specified research should find that context doesn't count; indeed he recommended that the most productive goal for political researchers should be to show that it does not count. Full knowledge about an individual should allow her/his voting behavior to be predicted without any reference to place of residence. Place doesn't matter in that approach: geography is unnecessary – a nuisance really.

¹ I am grateful to Kelvyn Jones and John O'Loughlin for comments and discussion.

² My academic career of more than fifty years, not least the last twenty-three spent in the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol, has shown that inter-disciplinary links involving physical geographers are in general much stronger than those involving human geographers (as I argued in Johnston, 2003).

John Agnew, on the other hand, had advanced an approach focused on ‘the impact of *historical-geographical context* on a range of political activities’ (Agnew 1996a: 131, his emphasis) which countered approaches such as King’s ‘in which representations of space only set boundaries for non-spatial processes’ (Agnew 1996a: 131); the funnelling of stimuli across space at a variety of spatial scales sees them merge in places so that ‘politics can be mapped not simply as the geographical outcome of non-spatial processes of political choice, but as a spatialized process of political influence and choice’ (p.132). He thus rejected King’s ‘ontological (and methodological) individualism’ and argued that place-as-context does matter because we ‘can never satisfactorily explain what drives individual choices and action unless we situate the individuals in the socio-geographic contexts of their lives ... which involve much more than the neighborhood effects King wants to reduce context to’ (Agnew 1996b: 165). Fortunately, most political – and other – geographers accept his lead rather than King’s; sadly, most political scientists do not.

For King and Enos – and presumably for other American political scientists too – context is irrelevant because they consider only the immediate context, which in many situations is membership of local social networks. If you have data on those networks and how influence flows through them – a lot of work has been done on that subject by Huckfeldt (1996), Mutz (2008), McClurg (2003) and others (see also Johnston and Pattie, 2011) – then your model may be fully specified. But that takes a very narrow view of place as context, certainly as conceived by John Agnew (1996a) in the paper to which King was responding. For Agnew context referred not only to the quotidian but also to ‘historically contingent places’, and he provides plenty of examples (e.g. Agnew, 1987, 2002; Agnew and Duncan, 1989), as indeed do other authors. Kevin Cox’s (1970) portrayal of the development of voting regions in Wales, for example, is a clear illustration of how local social milieux, once established, can have effects over decades; and one of the reasons for the failure of the 1984-1985 National Union of Mineworkers’ strike in the UK was that Nottinghamshire miners continued working, a reflection of the different labour market arrangements established there in the 1920s and sustained as a separate culture for the next six decades (Griffiths and Johnston, 1991). Moreover, Fielding (2017) has identified even longer-term influences – ‘it appears that in the twenty-first century, inhabitants of locations showing evidence of exposure to medieval ethnic and religious diversity are significantly more likely to express positive views about immigration and equal rights for minority groups’ (Fielding, 2018, 1).

O’Loughlin (2018: 146) also makes the wider point that publicly ‘geography in the US is hardly visible’, getting very few mentions in, for example, major media outlets such as the *New York Times*. He could have developed this argument much further, looking at geography’s visibility within American academia. Geography is not a small discipline there although most of its university departments, especially in the major research institutions (if it is present there at all), are relatively small compared to political science and other disciplines.³ But its visibility to and apparent impact on other disciplines appears to be slight. This is nothing new: Laponce (1980) noted some four decades ago that geography was dominantly an ‘importing’ discipline with regard to citations, with relatively little ‘exporting’, and O’Loughlin suggests that this remains the case (see also O’Loughlin, 2000): geographers cite widely across disciplines; political scientists cite geographers much less frequently.

Both Hopkins and Enos in their recent books implicitly adopt O’Loughlin’s ‘political geometry’ conception of geography. To them geography is a spatial template in which political and social processes are located. The relevant geographies for Hopkins’ analysis of the growing polarization of American politics are those of State and Congressional District boundaries which encompass places within which behavior is structured and changes in voting patterns occur. For Enos, too, geography provides the template within which he can test his hypotheses that what we generally term

³ At John O’Loughlin’s home university – Colorado at Boulder – the Department of Geography website lists 23 faculty members; the Department of Political Science lists 35.

neighborhood effects are a function of the size of the outgroup, the intensity of its spatial segregation, and the location of its residential areas relative to those of the ingroup (responses are stronger among the ingroup when its members live close to large concentrations of outgroup members). Cities have social geographies with boundaries between the areas occupied by different groups – but those geographies are very largely taken as given, not constructed.

So why do Hopkins and Enos – and they are certainly not alone among political and other social scientists – almost entirely ignore what geographers have done and are doing? Is academic geography largely invisible to practitioners of other disciplines in the United States? Is its literature not accessed outwith its own narrowly-defined boundaries? On the first question there are clearly many examples of individual contacts and collaborations across disciplinary boundaries but they do not seem to have encouraged widespread contact initiated from either side. On the latter question many scholars rarely venture outside their discipline's publication territory (its books and journals) when seeking inspiration. Geographers who publish in another discipline's journals may get their work cited by members of that discipline (although perhaps not as frequently as publications written by that discipline's own scholars); geographers who publish similar material in geography journals get even fewer cross-disciplinary citations. In part this undoubtedly reflects the pressures of time – why go searching for relevant literature in places where it might only rarely appear? – although electronic systems for delivering Tables of Contents to one's PC make such searches much less onerous than was formerly the case.

Perhaps it is not that geographers' work is invisible; perhaps scholars in other disciplines know of its existence but find it either largely irrelevant to their concerns or of insufficient quality to bother engaging with? Might that be the case for Hopkins and Enos: little of substantial importance relevant to their interests has been done by geographers to warrant encountering it? Hopkins' book is about the changing spatial distribution of electoral support for the Democratic and Republican parties. Surely geographers have done relevant high quality work on that – think of the analyses of long-term trends and their occasional punctuations initiated by Archer and Taylor (1981) and of the atlases of recent elections with detailed commentaries (Brunn et al., 2011; Archer et al., 2014; Watrel et al., 2018)? These add flesh to the map skeletons, but rarely engage with the wider issues addressed by Hopkins – the inter-relationships between spatial, ideological and legislative polarisation. Perhaps in this context although geographers gain inspiration from political science literature they don't address the issues central to political scientists' agenda? They draw the same maps but whereas for geographers the map is the focus of the investigation – something to be explained – to political scientists it is merely an accessory to answering wider questions?

This difference was recently brought home by a major piece of American litigation. Gerrymandering has long been a central component of redistricting practice there and it was encouraged by a 2006 Supreme Court judgment (*Vieth v Jubilerer*) that both condemned the cartographic abuse but argued that no standard existed against which any one map could be compared to evaluate claims that it was so constructed that it must be a gerrymander; the justices knew gerrymanders when they saw them and didn't like them – but could find no constitutional way to outlaw them. One consequence of that decision was more extensive and extreme gerrymandering in the 2010 redistricting cycle than previously, exemplified in a book that references some pieces by UK geographers, working with political scientists, but none by their American counterparts (McGann et al., 2016). Another outcome of that decision was that it mobilised scholars – political scientists, lawyers, statisticians ... but not geographers – to deploy their research findings in support of attempts to convince the courts that relevant metrics were available which they could apply in cases seeking to outlaw the practice. These were presented by the plaintiffs and also in several *amici curiae* briefs in the case of *Gill v*

Whitford which challenged an egregious gerrymander of Wisconsin State Assembly districts.⁴ None of those briefs involved academic geographers although one was presented as a 'Brief of Political Geography Scholars', three 'professors in several disciplines who study the effect of political geography on legislative district maps'.⁵ Two of those professors work in university political science departments and the other in a mathematical sciences department. Like Hopkins and Enos, they adopt the 'political geometry' conception of geography and make no reference to that discipline's literature. (Of course, there may be none that is relevant: geographers have written about gerrymanders – Monmonier, 2001 – but with few exceptions – e.g. Fan et al., 2015 – have not addressed the issue of countering gerrymanders through the courts.⁶ On geographers as expert witnesses more generally, see Clark, 1991.)

If there is relatively little geographical literature directly relevant to Hopkins' research focus it is hard to make the same statement with respect to Enos'.⁷ The core of his theoretically and empirically sophisticated book explores the nature of contextual/neighborhood effects, the consequences of urban residential segregation. Geographers, alongside sociologists and others within the multi-disciplinary field of urban studies, have done much to chart the complex nature of urban social geographies and to explore neighborhood effects. Enos refers to none of this work – for him social geography, the matrix within which his analyses are set, is concerned with the 'size and location of groups'. But he is not concerned with simply mapping and measuring that, nor with exploring contextual effects through the usual methods of ecological analyses in which it is very difficult to eliminate possible selection effects – the standard approaches adopted by geographers. Measurement of segregation does underpin some of his analyses, however, and he comments that 'It is notable ... that segregation has never been meaningfully measured cross-nationally' (p. 194; I guess it all depends on what you mean by meaningfully – Johnston et al., 2007!).

Enos' empirical studies are experimental, carefully constructed small- and large-scale attempts to test hypotheses regarding contextual/neighborhood effects in ways that allow causal relationships to be identified, rather than just inferred. This is not an area into which many geographers have moved – while Enos is moving knowledge forward through his experimental studies geographers are just extending existing knowledge with more case studies providing further circumstantial evidence of the hypothesised effect only. That may account for his lack of any references to work by geographers – he is aware of it but none of it is particularly relevant to his purpose. There is a three-page section in his chapter on neighborhood effects in Chicago entitled 'Methodological and theoretical advances of this study' most of which is given over to two issues – the 'modifiable areal unit problem' (MAUP) and 'the problem of scale'. Geographers may not have quite been the pioneers regarding either – see, for example, Duncan et al.'s (1961) book on *Statistical Geography* which ought to have achieved classic status within the discipline but instead got relatively little attention, perhaps because geographers didn't welcome sociologists invading their nascent field? But geographers have since written a great deal on both scale and the MAUP. Enos did find Openshaw's (1983) CATMOG volume on the latter – probably because it was referred to in Cho and

⁴ The case failed in the Supreme Court, on issues of standing rather than the technical ones relying on metrics for identifying gerrymanders.

⁵ All of the case documents can be accessed at <https://www.brennancenter.org/legal-work/whitford-v-gill> (accessed 18 July 2018).

⁶ The paper by Cirincione et al. (2000) was published in *Political Geography* but is not by geographers. Webster is one of the few geographers to write extensively about redistricting and gerrymandering, but his main focus (as in Webster, 2013) is on accounting for an existing map rather than challenging the practice. Morrill was engaged as a population geographer by a court to redraw the electoral district of Washington State in the 1970s (Morrill, 1973) and wrote further about the issue (Morrill, 1981) but not about challenging gerrymanders.

⁷ I should note that our work on multilevel modelling of the spatial polarization of the US electorate appeared too late for Hopkins to notice it (Johnston et al., 2016a, 2016b; Rohla et al., 2018).

Baer (2011), a paper in a political science journal concerned with contextual effects⁸ – but didn't explore the geographical literature any further.

So is geography relatively invisible – in this case to American political scientists – or is geographical work known but largely ignored because it is either not respected or does not address issues of common interest? The circumstantial evidence presented here suggests it may be a bit of both. Does it matter; does the lack of cross-disciplinary interaction retard developments in both fields (and, by implication, between geography and all other social science disciplines)? And if it does, how might the situation change, what might (political) geographers do to enhance their standing elsewhere in the academy (Johnston, 2001)?

Geographers have had to battle to gain recognition and status within the social sciences – in the UK and elsewhere as well as in the USA (on which see Johnston and Sidaway, 2016) – and despite some successes it appears that parity of esteem has yet to be achieved. Or perhaps I have just got too steamed up about the importance of geography (the subject) but the absence of Geography (the academic discipline) in two otherwise excellent books?⁹

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⁸ Wendy Tam Cho is a political scientist at the University of Illinois, with joint appointments in Mathematics and Statistics - <https://pol.illinois.edu/directory/profile/wendycho;she> has collaborated in a number of 'geographical' projects involving space, including with Luc Anselin

⁹ More than most, Doreen Massey expressed the importance of Geography because of the relevance of geography to all aspects of life and livelihood (Lee, 2018; Werner et al., 2018).

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